



TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IS A HORRIFIC CRIME THAT subjects its victims to modern day slavery, compelling them to work for little or no pay. Unfortunately, this terrible crime is an increasing profitable criminal enterprise in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of State, as many as 27 million men, women and children worldwide remain trapped as slaves by traffickers who strip away their dignity and basic human rights by preying on their vulnerabilities and exploiting them for involuntary labor and compulsory prostitution services.

This horrendous crime touches victims across the globe – and right here in Texas.

Eliminating human trafficking is a lofty goal, but it is well worth the effort because the benefits are significant – saving those who suffer the anguish, pain and shame of servitude. In 2003, the State of Texas took major steps to fight human trafficking by passing one of the first state-level anti-trafficking laws in the United States. Texas lawmakers enacted legislation that defined “forced labor or services” and “traffick[ing]” as crimes, and created felony offenses for persons who knowingly trafficked a person with the intent to force them to perform labor or services. At the same time, regional task forces and other

collaborative efforts were established across the state to identify human trafficking victims, create service response systems and bring traffickers to justice.

In 2009, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 4009 by Sen. Leticia Van de Putte and Rep. Randy Weber creating the Texas Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force. The Task Force’s inaugural report to the 82nd Texas Legislature highlighted the Task Force’s collaborative approach to address human trafficking on a statewide and regional level. The 2011 Task Force Report provided a human trafficking overview including indicators of its prevalence, challenges facing law enforcement agencies and victim service organizations, and potential best practices and anti-trafficking initiatives.

Of the 35 legislative recommendations identified in the 2011 Task Force Report, the Texas Legislature enacted 32. The anti-trafficking legislation, which was sponsored by Sen. Van de Putte and Rep. Senfronia Thompson, provided an improved legal framework for combating human trafficking by:

- Defining sex and labor trafficking
- Increasing penalties upon conviction
- Creating automatic life sentence for

subsequent convictions

- Affording more protection for child trafficking victims
- Including certain convictions in the sex offender registry
- Opening the use of protective orders for victims
- Fostering closer cooperation between investigating agencies

The statutory changes recommended by the 2011 Task Force Report and, in turn, passed by the Legislature were significant. Citing the legislation enacted in 2011, Shared Hope International – a leading anti-human trafficking organization – ranked Texas number one in the nation for human trafficking laws. Another preeminent anti-trafficking organization, the Polaris Project, also accorded high marks to Texas’ prevention efforts.

Unfortunately, while Texas has made significant progress, traffickers continue to adapt their criminal enterprises to entrap more victims and evade law enforcement. To eradicate human trafficking within our borders, Texas must meet these challenges head-on and with renewed commitment – providing new building blocks for law enforcement, prosecutors and service providers.

Recognizing that the most successful efforts will be those that utilize collaborative endeavors and pooled resources, the Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force published its report for the 83rd Texas Legislature. The report outlines additional steps the State must take to prevent human trafficking. These measures include improving victim identification and assistance, prosecuting traffickers, developing additional preventative strategies, increasing data collection efforts, and strengthening intelligence-sharing communities.

Updating the State’s human trafficking prevention laws will give Texas law enforcement agencies more training, tools and power to recognize and battle this problem. In light of human trafficking’s complexity as a criminal enterprise, we all need to work together to find solutions that help victims and punish their oppressors. For a copy of the publication, “The Texas Response to Human Trafficking,” please visit our agency website at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov. Peace officers may direct additional inquiries to Captain Greg Lucas of the Criminal Investigations Division at (512) 936-1335.

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